DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR
news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

For Release August 17, 1989 Michael L. Smith 202-343-5650

WILDLIFE TRANSLOCATIONS EVALUATED BY FISH AND WILDLIFE RESEARCHERS

Moving wildlife in order to help save it can be a successful conservation technique if the process is planned carefully. But such a translocation, as it is known to wildlife scientists, probably will not effect miracle recoveries for rarer species, especially if it is attempted only as a last resort. These are among the findings of a study completed recently by several of the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service researchers and reported in the August 4 issue of Science.

In their article, "Translocations as a Species Conservation Tool: Status and Strategy," Service researchers Brad Griffith, J. Michael Scott, and James W. Carpenter, along with New Zealand researcher Christine Reed, analyzed survey results of wildlife introductions and reintroductions conducted in Australia, Canada, Hawaii, New Zealand, and the continental United States between 1973 and 1986.

"Our work was intended to identify how well translocations work," according to Griffith, the principal investigator and currently assistant unit leader for wildlife at the Fish and Wildlife Service's research cooperative unit at the University of Maine in Orono. "We wanted to determine which factors were associated with successful efforts and which strategies yielded the greatest success."

At least 93 species were translocated between 1973 and 1986, and currently about 700 translocations are conducted each year. The estimated success varies widely depending on the types of animals released and the conditions of the release. In general, translocations were more successful for herbivores than carnivores. The most successful translocations, where self-sustaining populations resulted, occurred when large numbers of wild-caught native game animals were released over several years within the core of the species' historical range, into areas of high-quality habitat that were without a similar competitor species. Wild turkey and bighorn sheep restorations were among the more common and visible representatives of this category.

The least successful translocations involved short-term releases of small numbers of captive-reared threatened or endangered animals or sensitive species on the periphery or outside of historical ranges, in areas of low habitat quality where physically similar competitors were present.

The low success for translocations of threatened, endangered, and otherwise sensitive species underscores the importance of habitat quality, the researchers noted, as well as the need for a thorough understanding of the factors that limit existing populations. Population recovery for such species, they observed, is likely to occur through translocation only in exceptionally favorable circumstances.

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